First Steps: Keeping Kids’ Feet Healthy and Happy

When it comes to the health of our children, you do everything you can to help them grow up healthy and strong. You get them vaccinated, take them to the dentist and optometrist, and you do your best to ensure they eat a nutrition diet that will help them grow, but are you aware of the important role foot health plays in a child’s overall development?

"Every parent knows the frustration of trying to keep up with children who grow quickly and that rapid pace of growth can mean children need new shoes and socks every few months," says Dr Matthew Garoufalis, a podiatrist and past president of the American Podiatric Medical Association (APMA). With warmer weather upon us, it's a great time for parents to take a look at their children's shoes to ensure they're wearing footwear that will serve them well throughout the active days of summer.

Ill-fitting footwear can irritate kids' feet and aggravate existing conditions caused by injury, heredity, deformity or illness.

APMA offers parents guidance for keeping kids in shoes that fit properly and protect their feet:

- Take the child with you and have him or her try on the shoes. Every shoe fits differently, so even if you're buying your child's correct size, the shoe still may not be comfortable. Have the child try on the footwear with the socks or tights you expect will be worn with the shoes.
- Always measure a child's foot before buying new shoes. Children's feet grow so quickly, their shoe size can literally change from month to month.
- Shop late in the afternoon when feet are largest and make sure to fit the shoe to the larger foot. Everyone's feet swell by the end of the day and no one has feet that are exactly the same size. One will always be slightly larger.
- Never buy shoes that are too large or need a "break-in" period. Shoes should be comfortable immediately. Buying shoes for children isn't like buying a too-large coat that you know they'll grow into. Tripping or even injury can result from a child wearing shoes that are too big for him or her.
- Let kids have a say--within reason. "Of course, parents will have to guide children toward good choices," Dr. Garafoulis says. "But allowing kids to have a say in the shoe-buying process can help promote healthy foot habits down the road."
- Once your child takes the new shoes home, keep watch to ensure the shoes stay comfortable and in good shape. Examine the child's feet at the end of the day for signs of irritation. If your child always wants to remove one or both of the shoes, it may mean the shoes are uncomfortable.
- Finally, never include footwear in hand-me-downs. Just because a shoe size fits one child comfortably doesn't mean it will fit a younger sibling the same way. Plus, sharing shoes can spread fungi like athlete's foot or nail fungus.

To learn more about foot health for the whole family, visit www.apma.org